

HAVING THE HUMILITY TO LET OTHERS GO FIRST

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father^[e] went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

A couple of weeks ago I talked about how Jesus was asked nearly 180 questions, how he asked more than 300 questions, but how Jesus himself answered only 8 questions directly. More often Jesus would answer a question with a question. In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus is asked a question; "By what authority are you here in the Temple teaching?" The Temple rulers had not authorized Jesus. He had no formal rabbinical training, and he was not from the correct tribe or class. Jesus was the illegitimate son of a carpenter from the town of Nazareth. So they asked him in front of the crowd, "Who gave you the authority to teach in the Temple?"

I love how Jesus handled the question, and I imagine he did it with a Cheshire grin: "I will answer your question if you will answer mine first. The Baptism of John; was it of divine origin, or was it of human." The rabbis were afraid to say it was divine, because if it was then Jesus would ask them why they weren't following the teachings of John the Baptist. But if they said it was of human origin, they ran the risk of alienating and angering the throngs of followers of John. After conferring with one another, the rabbis told Jesus they hadn't a clue, so Jesus refused to answer their question about his authority.

But Jesus wasn't done. I think Jesus was getting tired of always being questioned by the religious authorities who were desperately trying to humiliate him. So Jesus gets dirty and nasty with them. Jesus said "I have a question for you, gentlemen. A father had two sons, so he went to son number one and asked him to go into the fields to do some labor. The son refused, but later changed his mind and did what the father asked. The father then went to the second son and asked him to do some labor in the field. The second son said he would go, but he never did.

So Jesus asked the rabbis, "So which of the two sons did what the father asked". They said "the first son." Listen again to what Jesus said: "Thieves and hookers will get into the kingdom of God long before any of you self-righteous hypocrites, for at least they listened to John the Baptist and were baptized by him."

Ouch! Jesus shouldn't talk like that, should he? But Jesus called it like he saw it. The religious authorities were known for their words, but their actions didn't follow. It is easy for us Christians to sit here in disdain for these religious elitists, but are we really much better? We cannot sit back and mock them when it is so

easy for us to say “Yes Lord, we will follow you”, when too often we refuse to follow the difficult teachings of God. The same judgment is directed at those of us who call ourselves Christians. Do we forgive as we have been forgiven? Do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, stand up with the oppressed, and welcome the resident alien. Well of course we do, as long as it doesn't cost us too much, doesn't impinge on our lifestyle, and doesn't diminish our rights.

We are often like the second son in the parable who said he would do as the father asked but later changed his mind and didn't follow through. The apostle Paul said that to be followers of Jesus we need to be willing to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. But the problem with living sacrifices is that they sometimes sneak off the alter of sacrifice, slithering away where it is safe.

One of the things I do is prop myself up and say, “well, at least I'm not one of those judgmental, narrow minded Christians. Sometimes I point a finger at the wacky TV evangelists who are raking in money, living in their big houses, driving their fancy cars, flying in their personal jets. But this parable is addressed to me and to you. Jesus doesn't care about our words. He cares about our actions.

The world isn't listening to our words; they are looking at our deeds. Our neighbors might hear our words, but they are looking closely to see if our words are consistent with our actions. We talk about love, we talk about doing good, but do we show it? Do we do the deeds if they cost us something, or make our lives a little less convenient?

I have served in some pretty good churches for 20 years, and I have met some remarkable people. Some of them couldn't lead a prayer at a committee meeting if their life depended on it, but if they were asked to make a casserole for someone coming home from the hospital they wouldn't hesitate to do it. I have known some men who never moved their lips while singing a hymn, but if an elderly widow needed some help shoveling snow, they were there without being asked. Some I know rarely come to church, but if the church is hurting financially they anonymously slip a check into the collection plate. I have known many who never had any Bible training but when asked to teach a Sunday school class they

hesitantly said yes and they've been teaching now for years. Some living sacrifices stay on the alter and don't slither away.

A friend of mine had the opportunity to visit the little Baptist Church in Plains, GA where former president Jimmy Carter attends. He was there when Jimmy was teaching the adult Sunday school class. He noticed in the bulletin it said "Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubbery."

Sometimes it isn't the one who preaches or prays eloquent prayers who reflects God's will. More likely it is the one who sends out those cards I have received over the years, telling me how much they appreciate me and are praying for me. They are the ones who will be walking in ahead of me into the kingdom of God. Like Jesus said, a lot of thieves and prostitutes will go ahead of me. That's okay with me though. I'm just glad a broken person like me makes it solely by the grace of God.